

Notes on The Veldt by Ray Bradbury

Lydia Hadley tells George that she's worried about the nursery, which is this awesome virtual reality room where kids and adults can go off on any adventure they want. (Do you know the Star Trek holodeck? It's pretty much that.)

See, the Hadley family live in this awesome automated house that does all the work for them. Which leaves them lots of free time to feel bad about themselves. This is mid-century America, so everyone feels bad about themselves. Ever watch Mad Men? It's like that, minus the ever-handsome Don Draper. Then again, maybe George is a looker.

The kids Peter and Wendy are spending lots of time in virtual Africa, with lions who always seem to be eating. This makes Mama Lydia nervous, because she thinks fake lions can kill her. Ha! There's no way that will happen, right? Hasn't she ever heard of a TV before?

Peter and Wendy are very independent kids. Today, that would go on their college essay, but in the 1950s, it's, well, less than ideal. They talk back to their parents (someone call the cops!), and George and Lydia worry that maybe they've spoiled the kids. George invites psychologist David McClean to come give his opinion, the lesson here being that doctors' opinions are better than wives' opinions. At least, according to George.

The doctor is in. David tells the Hadley parents that they messed up big time and need to turn off the nursery. But before David can get them all to go on an actual vacation (and not just a virtual safari), the kids beg the parents to let them use the nursery one last time. And then the kids lock their parents in with the fake lions.

When David McClean comes back, he sees the lions eating... something.

Mother Lydia is worried about the nursery, which is her superpower in this story. Worrying, not the nursery. She tells husband George about her concerns.

Since the kitchen of the future is making dinner for the family, the parents have some free time for a nice chat.

So they check out the nursery, which gives our narrator tons of time for description.

We hear about their "HappyLife Home," which is expensive. It also does things automatically for them, like feeding and clothing them. Maybe it's something like this contraption from Wallace and Gromit.

The nursery was also very expensive. But it's amazing because it allows all sorts of virtual reality travel thanks to "odorophonics" (17) and "mental tape" (37). (In other words, Bradbury just makes up stuff that sounds good. Good for him and see "Genre" for a quick word on that habit.)

Right now the nursery is set to "African veldt." If you're curious, the veldt refers to grasslands, complete with lions and gazelles, and everything the light touches.

Lydia is nervous about those virtual lions. Oh, you know those 1950s hysterical housewives—always worried about lions! She even thinks she heard a scream.

After the lions finish eating... something, they come chase the parents. George basically thinks "what fun for everyone" (28) but Lydia thinks "Lions! Yikes!" (Disclaimer: that's not an actual quote.)

The parents run out of the room, with Lydia in tears and George laughing. The best marriages usually go like that, with one person laughing and the other crying, right?

George tries to calm Lydia by reminding her that the nursery isn't real. "It's all odorophonics and sonics, Lydia" (37).

But George promises to tell the kids to stop hanging out in Africa. What fun place will they visit next? The Civil War? The French Revolution?

George doesn't want to lock the kids out of the nursery. If he does, he's worried they'll throw tantrums and not help their parents with the tech stuff that parents never seem able to do. (Like VCRs and Wi-Fi networks and getting TV shows downloaded directly into their brains.)

Maybe you need a rest, says dad. (Note to self: "You need a rest" is almost never a helpful comment.)

Lydia disagrees: I need more work, she says. We'd paraphrase it as: Oh, how I long to knit and sweep the house. But she's useless now, she says, because "The house is wife and mother now, and nursemaid" (56). What's Mama Lydia supposed to do?

Lydia thinks George is also depressed since he has little to do, too.

Plus she's worried about the lions getting out of the nursery.

Later, the parents are enjoying a nice home-cooked dinner. (Literally, the home cooked the dinner for them.) Peter and Wendy are off at a carnival.

George thinks about the nursery and how it responds to telepathic signals. If that's true, why is there so much death in that African veldt?

Answer: the kids are thinking about death, which George supposes is natural: "Long before you knew what death was you were wishing it on someone else" (67). Um, false.

George checks the nursery, which is still set to man-eating lions in Africa. Also, he hears another scream. There sure are a lot of screams coming from the nursery these days. We hope that's not foreshadowing or something.

Over the last year, the kids had done lots of different fantasy worlds (see "Shout-Outs"), but for the last month it's been all Africa all the time.

The room should respond to thoughts, right? So George tries to think the lions away. But it doesn't work for him.

Now Lydia is worried that the kids tampered with the nursery, since Peter is so smart. (And Wendy? Well, she sure is a good follower.

The kids come home, full of ice cream and hot dogs, which isn't a crime, right?

George and Lydia ask about Africa, but Peter and Wendy are all like "whatever are you talking about, dear parents?" In other words, they're playing it cool.

Wendy runs off to check the nursery when Peter tells her to, even though their dad tells her not to.

Wendy comes back to say it isn't Africa, so the whole family goes to check, and it isn't.

The nursery is now set to a gentle forest scene from the book Green Mansions. (See "Shout-Outs.")

George sends the kids to bed.

To get there, they use some sort of pneumatic tube, which used to be how people imagined the future.

He then finds an old wallet of his that has clearly been chewed on by lions. How do fake lions chew real wallets? Unclear.

Dad locks the nursery. Good move, Papa.

In bed, George and Lydia worry about the nursery: it's supposed to help people work off their neuroses, but maybe it's just feeding into their kids' negative feelings.

Well, says Lydia, the kids have been acting weird since you forbade them from going to New York a month ago. Hmm... a month ago. Isn't that about how long the kids have been playing on the veldt?

George agrees to get David McClean to come look at the nursery since he's a psychologist.

And it won't be a moment too soon, because the kids seem to have broken in that night and set it to Africa already.

The parents hear two screams, and Lydia says the screams sound familiar.

She and George are so nervous that they have trouble falling asleep even though their beds are rocking them to sleep (150).

Later, George and Peter talk about the nursery. George says he's thinking about turning off the room. Or maybe the whole house.

They'll live like primitive man, without even Netflix streaming.

But Peter doesn't want the nursery turned off, so he threatens his dad a little. Just a little.

Frankly, the idea of turning off the house sounds terrible to Peter. He doesn't want to have to do things, like tie his shoes and brush his teeth. "I don't want to do anything but look and listen and smell; what else is there to do?" (167).

Later, David McClean comes to check out the house. The last time he was in the nursery it seemed ordinary, with just the usual amount of paranoia and hate from the kids.

(And just to see if we've been paying attention, there's another scream from the nursery.)

David examines the nursery and says very scientifically that he has a bad feeling about it.

See, the nursery was originally designed to help kids, but these kids are clearly just using it to harp on their bad blood with their parents.

George says that he did turn off the room a month ago to show that he wanted the kids to do their homework (200). (So first he says they can't go to New York and now he's telling them to do their homework. Who does he think he is, their father? Oh, wait.)

But David says the problem isn't just the room. The problem is that George and Lydia are bad parents. (Wow, this is going really well.)

According to David, the kids love the room more than they love their parents. Especially since the room does stuff for them.

Before they leave, David finds a scarf of Lydia's, lion-chewed.

George turns off the house and the kids freak out.

At some point, David leaves, but plans to come back to take the Hadleys to the airport for their house-less vacation.

But George is firmly committed to the whole Luddite business, saying that these gadgets have been preventing them from really living (235).

Since the kids are freaking out, Lydia says they can at least have one last visit to the nursery before they all go on vacation. (To Iowa of all places. Maybe they're going to see the future birthplace of James T. Kirk.)

While packing, the parents hear Peter and Wendy shouting for them from the nursery. So, of course, the parents rush in.

When they're in the nursery, George and Lydia discover that a) it's set to Africa, b) their children aren't there, c) there are lions, and d) the door slammed shut behind them.

Not. Good.

When the lions approach, the parents scream. And that's when they realize why the other screams sound familiar (263). It was them screaming all along. Dun dun dun.

And then...

... we don't see what happens. (See "What's Up with the Ending" for more on that.)

David McClean comes back to take the family to the airport. Iowa or bust!

But George and Lydia have gone missing. Peter and Wendy, meanwhile, are enjoying a picnic on the African veldt, while the lions are eating... something.

In a pretty killer last line, Wendy offers McClean a cup of tea, proving how adorably civilized she is.